Open Letter to Chancellor Richard Lyons

By Douglas C. Youvan, Ph.D. (UC Berkeley, Biophysics, 1981)

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Dear Chancellor Lyons,

I read your July message to the Cal community with a complex mix of emotions. The pride you express in Berkeley's scientific and entrepreneurial achievements — from cutting-edge gene therapy to climate adaptation strategies — is understandable. As someone who earned a Ph.D. in Biophysics from UC Berkeley in 1981, I recognize the brilliance, the vision, and the perseverance it takes to bring such innovations to life.

But as I reflect on these triumphs, I cannot help but feel an emptiness beneath the words. Because there is something missing. Something irreversible.

Gaza.

No innovation, no philanthropic building, no CRISPR breakthrough can reverse what has happened there. Thousands of innocent lives lost. Hospitals destroyed. A generation of children psychologically shattered. The very foundations of international law trampled with impunity.

And in this context — in the long shadow of this catastrophe — your letter celebrates progress without once pausing to acknowledge the deeper moral crisis facing our world and our institutions.

I ask you honestly:
Do you believe that scientific success can serve as moral absolution?
Do you believe that incubator hubs and startup capital can somehow balance the scale?

I don't.

And I believe many in our community, whether they say it aloud or not, feel the same.

Berkeley has long stood for more than technical achievement. It once stood for moral courage — for speaking when it was dangerous, for standing when others crouched in silence. That legacy is not dead, but it is in peril.

In a time when university leaders are being summoned before Congress, when speech is surveilled, and students are disciplined for dissent, we cannot afford a university that conflates innovation with virtue.

We need a university that remembers that silence in the face of atrocity is complicity.

You write that "it takes determination, adaptability, resilience, and the support of the community." I would add: it also takes conscience. It takes remembrance. It takes the humility to know that some things, once lost, cannot be restored — only grieved.

Gaza will not be reversed by genome editing.

But perhaps a different kind of healing — moral, spiritual, human — might begin if leaders like yourself were willing to name what cannot be repaired. To mourn publicly. To speak clearly.

The world is watching. So are the students. So are the dead.

Sincerely,
Douglas C. Youvan, Ph.D.
UC Berkeley, Biophysics, 1981